

# The Elkhorns Working Group Newsletter



## Message from the Chair

Welcome to the 2nd Edition of the Elkhorn Working Group newsletter. We have made great progress this year. Ecosystem Research Group presented the Elkhorn Vegetation Study in June of 2006 and we worked through 2006 to July 2007 on our own recommendations gleaned from this study and presented them to the Elkhorn Steering Committee in July. They are considering our recommendations and have included some in their 2008 Program of Work. We will present the Vegetation Study findings to the public on March 4, 2008, 6:00 PM at the Colonial Inn in Helena. We are also progressing with our "Inclusion" process which will include the public in the wildlife counting and distribution tallies.

In December, 2007, I was elected Chairman of the EWG. I am looking forward to this challenge. Thanks to Brud Smith for his hard work and diligence the past two and a half years. Congratulations to David Brown and Jim Crichton, our newly elected Vice President and Secretary. Some members have resigned and we welcome 2 new members, James Crichton and Carolyn Lewis. Thanks to Chuck Ruzicka for his hard work. We will miss him.

2007 was a very busy year and we look forward to 2008 and beyond for our comments and recommendations to be put to work for the benefit of the Elkhorns.

*Tom Williams*

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### Special points of Interest:

Meetings are held the 2nd Thursday of the month. The public is always welcome!

## The New Elkhorn Coordinator

Meet the new Elkhorn Coordinator! Denise Pengeroth became the Coordinator last summer as a result of re-organization efforts on the Helena National Forest. Denise remains the Forest Wildlife Program Leader while taking on the additional role of Elkhorn Coordinator. This is a logical union given the wildlife emphasis of the Elkhorns as a wildlife management unit. This is an exciting opportunity for Denise and she welcomes your thoughts and input! She can be reached in Helena at 495-3736 or Townsend at 495-3860.

## Elkhorn Vegetation Study Key Findings

The Elkhorn Vegetation Study is an independent analysis conducted by Ecosystem Research Group (ERG) and sponsored by EWG. The project intensively studied vegetation and grazing in the Elkhorn Mountains focusing on the Kimber and North Crow Elk Herd Units (EHU) and associated grazing allotments. Following is a summary of some of the key findings. For more information on the Vegetation Study visit the Elkhorns Website.

**Ecological Condition**— The study indicates that overall rangeland habitat is in reasonable condition. However, conifer encroachment into historic rangelands and noxious weeds threaten the ecological condition and productivity of rangeland habitats in the Elkhorns.

**Elk and Cattle Overlap**—Elk/cattle overlap is common in both the North Crow and Kimber EHUs. The most important overlap areas are those on lower slopes that receive both spring elk use and summer cattle use. Research elsewhere indicates that when utilization by cattle does not exceed moderate use, elk may benefit from this overlap.

It is important to understand the competitive and complimentary relationship between wildlife and domestic livestock and the impacts cattle may have on public land resources. These impacts can be both positive and negative.

Benefits include the fact that adjacent private grazing lands provide open space and wildlife habitat. Negative impacts include competition with wildlife and degradation of native plant communities.

While there will always be problem areas, management must ensure the overall health of the ecosystem by allowing flexible, adaptive, management. The benefit of coordinated public/private land management in the Elkhorns is the leverage it offers our public land resources to produce a far larger accessible wildlife ecosystem than would otherwise be available from public land only.



**Permittees, USFS, and ERG**

## EWG Recommendations

Since completion of the ERG final report in June 2006, EWG has devoted a great deal of time reviewing and discussing the recommendations submitted in ERG's study. It is important to note that the ERG study was an independent analysis of the tasks and information sought. The EWG recommendations are our attempt as an independent, diverse citizen's group to use the collaborative process to further scrutinize ERG's recommendations. That being said, ERG's study and work, and EWG's recommendations, would and could not have been accomplished without the support, funding, work, and information furnished by numerous dedicated agency personnel and private stakeholders. That co-operation is what makes the study and recommendations worthwhile and forms the basis to accomplish whatever good comes from the study and the recommendations. Highlights from the various recommendations are summarized below.

## Cattle Management Recommendations

to resolve cattle vs. wildlife use conflicts and begin to develop long term approaches designed to sustain grassland systems.

The Agencies should continue current adaptive allotment systems, rather than strict management plans.

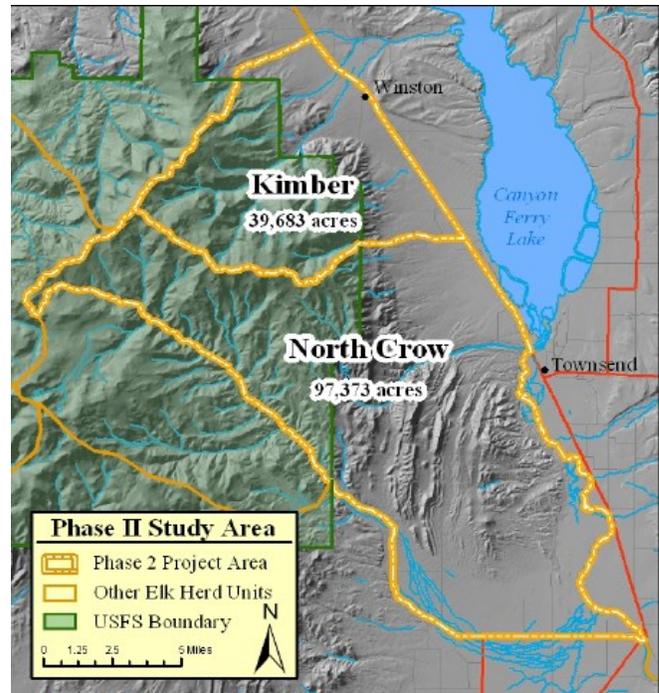
The Agencies should ensure and commit to continue providing an experienced range conservationist to the Elkhorn Wildlife Management Unit.

The Agencies should maintain cattle grazing on public land and utilize cattle as a tool for achieving wildlife management goals.

The Agencies should re-evaluate their upland utilization standards.



**Cold Springs Pasture of the North Crow Allotment in 1939**



**Elkhorn Vegetation Study Area**

## Monitoring Recommendations

Increase upland utilization monitoring during cattle grazing season. This will include annual vigilance of both permittees and range managers to closely monitor and ensure upland use standards are not exceeded.

The Agencies should establish, maintain, and document an annual pre-cattle utilization monitoring program in all allotments in the Elkhorns.

The Agencies should establish future vegetative data collection programs and methods to better utilize historic data.

The Agencies should continue existing riparian utilization standards and monitoring while rethinking monitoring site selections.

The Agencies should develop and utilize percent of the normal precipitation figures to predict annual production and to plan for reduced forage availability. These precipitation data should be utilized for adaptive monitoring for elk/cattle management purposes.

The Agencies should rework upland use standards for areas that have transitioned to non-native grass communities.

The Agencies should begin data collection on the west side of the Elkhorns.

Management strategies should move away from attempts

## Elk Management Recommendations

Based on the past history of winter counts and trend count information for the Elkhorns, we recommend that the trend survey method already in use continues and that Montana Department Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) search for intermediate methods to produce an approximate population estimate.

The Agencies should review the riparian standards and guidelines so that standards are better suited to the on-the-ground situation consistent with dual use.

The Elkhorn Working Group, Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and FWP should work collaboratively to develop trend count objectives for elk.

The Agencies should undertake a biological study to determine if there are reproductive diseases affecting the Elkhorn elk herd units.

Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks should issue a press release/newsletter article after elk aerial counts are completed in February of each year.

## Weed Control Recommendations

Fall annual updates on the 'state of the weeds' should be provided to the Elkhorn Working Group by all parties engaged in weed management in the Elkhorns.

All parties engaged in weed management in the Elkhorns should actively seek funding and pursue weed treatments in areas already identified.

All parties engaged in weed management in the Elkhorns should monitor weed treatment effectiveness and utilize results to determine need for follow-up treatments and to ensure that funding is available for the follow-up treatments.

All parties engaged in weed management in the Elkhorns should explore opportunities to develop a permanent fund for long-term weed treatments.

All parties engaged in weed management in the Elkhorns should map weed infestations in the Elkhorns and provide annual updates that include type of treatment, monitoring, effectiveness, and follow-up needs.

## Conifer Encroachment Management Recommendations

The Agencies should continue ongoing encroachment reduction treatments through mechanical manipulation (e.g. slashing, masticator) or prescribed fire and pursue additional treatments in other known areas. The Agencies should also identify other areas of conifer encroachment for future treatments.

niques including but not limited to prescribed fire, mechanical treatment, and restoration of riparian areas (e.g. re-establish historic stream flow, encourage willow and aspen development, reduce head-cutting, and increase the area of wetland).

The Agencies should strive to re-establish proper riparian function through the use of various management tech-

niques including but not limited to prescribed burning or mechanical treatment.



**Elkhorn Pasture North Crow Allotment 1959**



**Elkhorn Pasture North Crow Allotment 2004  
Note changes in conifer distribution**

## Elkhorn Working Group Members

Darrell Baum  
Dave Baum  
David Brown  
Quentin Kujala  
Mark Lincoln  
Tom Lythgoe  
Denise Pengeroth  
Jim Posewitz  
Sam Samson  
Bud Smith  
Brud Smith  
Nelson Wert  
Tom Williams  
Renee Johnson  
James Crichton  
Carolyn Lewis  
Sundi West  
Ed Finstad

*For more information, contact Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Helena Area Office at 495-3260. Also, if you're interested in learning how to become a member, contact an EWG member.*

## Upcoming Events

EWG is excited to announce our upcoming presentation to roll out our recommendations on the Elkhorn Vegetation Study. Please join us on March 4, 2008, at the Colonial Inn in Helena at 6:00 PM..

***For more information on the Elkhorns, and the Elkhorns Working Group visit the website!***

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/helena/elkhorns/>

## Elk Security Recommendations

The Agencies should promote elk use in forested stands in the late-summer and fall by promoting palatable foraging habitat, where appropriate, through thinning and prescribed fire

The Agencies should thin or reduce conifers, where appropriate, in areas identified as security habitat in order to reduce risks of catastrophic wildfire, to enhance grasslands, and to maintain security habitat.

## Other Activities

EWG has been busy since the release of our last newsletter. While most of our time and attention has been devoted to developing recommendations on the Elkhorn Vegetation Study, we've still managed to accomplish a lot of other work in the Elkhorns.

We provided input to two key proposals in the Elkhorns: the Bureau of Land Management Butte Field Office Resource Management Plan and the National Guard Limestone Hills Proposed Withdrawal. Because these proposals factor heavily in how we'll be able to ranch, recreate, and conserve wildlife in the Elkhorns, EWG supported those proposals that favored a balance of use while maintaining a healthy landscape. We also provided feedback on the Mountain States Transmission Intertie, a proposal to construct a new transmission line between Idaho and southwestern Montana by NorthWestern Energy. We recommended that the existing transmission line corridor be utilized in order to minimize new construction on the landscape.

We provided letters of support for several other activities in the Elkhorns. We endorsed a Forest Service grant request to the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation for weed treatments in the Elkhorns which has tentatively been funded. We submitted letters to the Montana Congressional Delegation in support of bills that would transfer the Elkhorn Cemetery from the Forest Service to Jefferson County to be administered by the Cemetery Board. We will be providing input into the proposed gold mine operations of Elkhorn Goldfield Inc. The Environmental Analysis is due out in March, 2008.

We worked with the land management

The Agencies should thin known areas of dense, thick conifer regeneration stands in order to open up these areas for use by elk and minimize elk use of private land.

The Agencies should use prescribed fire to reduce or eliminate areas of conifer encroachment.



**Town of Elkhorn Circa 1893**

Agencies to accomplish much needed weed treatments on the recently acquired Iron Mask property, Shep's Ridge, and other areas in the Elkhorns. We presented our Elkhorn Vegetation Study recommendations to the Elkhorn Steering Committee, the heads of the respective agencies who manage the Elkhorns. Perhaps most excitingly, we participated in the dedication of the Iron Mask property, 5548 acres, to the Bureau of Land Management. This effort was a long time in the works and EWG threw our support fully behind this proposal in an effort to preserve the cultural, traditional, and natural heritage of the landscape.

Of course, no season is complete without getting out into the mountains that we so fervently appreciate. We visited the Warm Springs Habitat Enhancement Project in the North Elkhorns, a project whose goal is to restore ponderosa pine communities and minimize threats of catastrophic fire. We visited weed treatment experiment areas in the South Elkhorns during which time we underscored the importance of working together across boundaries in this 'war on weeds'. We also visited the Elkhorn Cemetery and the Elkhorn Goldfields Inc. gold mine operations.

We've been busy! We hope to see you in our travels, whether at one of our monthly meetings or out and about in this mountain range we call home!